SPORT

Greece, Argentina make winning starts at United Cup

PERTH: Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas and Maria Sakkari play against Japan's Yasutaka Uchiyama and Nao Hibino during their United Cup tie on Friday.—AFP

PERTH: Stefanos Tsitsipas found his winning touch on his return to action from injury as he led Greece to a 3-0 win over Japan on Friday in group play at the ATP-WTA United Cup.

The former world number three dispatched Shintaro Mochizuki 6-3, 6-4 in singles as he played his first match in almost four months after a recurring back injury forced him to take a break from the sport.

"I've had a lot of uncertainty, I didn't know if I could compete," Tsitsipas said.

"But to play at this level is something I'm very grateful for.

"I'm healthy and that's the most important thing in the world.

"I hope this tournament can give me some confidence before the Australian Open [Jan 18-Feb 1]," added the 27-year-old two-time Grand Slam finalist.

Team-mate Maria Sakkari began the tie with a 6-4, 6-2 defeat of Naomi Osaka.

Japan's former world number one is suffering with a head cold and played far from her best in Perth.

"I was not operating at the percent I would want, I did not play amazing," the four-time Grand Slam champion said.

"Honestly, it was not a bad first match for what it was.

"I'm thankful I have another to play. I need to not be afraid of making mistakes."

Tsitsipas and Sakkari then teamed up for Greece's dead-rubber mixed doubles tie to beat Japanese duo Yasutaka Uchiyama and Nao Hibino 6-2, 6-3.

Earlier, Sebastian Baez and Solana Sierra led Argentina to a 3-0 defeat of Spain.

World number 45 Baez got Argentina on the scoreboard with a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Jaume Munar, earning a surprise win on hard court after just three victories in nine matches on the surface last season.

The South Americans clinched the win when 66th-ranked tournament debutante Sierra held her nerve for a 6-4, 5-7, 6-0 defeat of Jessica Bouzas Maneiro.

The 21-year-old, who reached the fourth round at Wimbledon last year, said: "I knew I had to be tough.

"I'm super-happy with my level."

Argentina then won the mixed doubles rubber in straight sets.

Ties at the United Cup comprise one men's and one women's singles and a mixed doubles, with group winners in each host city — Perth and Sydney — advancing to the quarter-finals along with the best runners-up.—AFP

Manchester City charge stalls at Sunderland, Liverpool held by Leeds

SUNDERLAND: Lutsharel Geertruida (C) and Omar Alderete (third L) of Sunderland block a shot from Manchester City's Josko Gvardiol (second R) during their Premier League match at The Stadium of Light.—AFP

LONDON: Manchester City trail Arsenal by four points at the top of the Premier League after failing to end Sunderland's unbeaten home record in a 0-0 draw on Thursday, while Liverpool were also held by Leeds.

In a goal-shy start to 2026, three of the four New Year's Day fixtures ended without a goal as Tottenham also played out a 0-0 draw on Thomas Frank's return to Brentford.

City had won eight consecutive games to end 2025 and cut the gap on the Gunners to just two points.

But they were unable to respond to Arsenal's impressive 4-1 demolition of third-place Aston Villa on Tuesday despite creating a host of chances against a depleted Sunderland.

The Black Cats were without six players at the Africa Cup of Nations plus influential centre-back Dan Ballard due to injury.

Bernardo Silva had a City goal ruled out for offside just six minutes in.

Sunderland goalkeeper Robin Roefs was in inspired form to deny Erling Haaland and Josko Gvardiol, while Savinho blasted a glorious chance over.

But City could not find the breakthrough as Sunderland preserved their record of not losing in 10 games at the Stadium of Light since returning to the top flight.

"It's a mystery," said City boss Pep Guardiola on his side's inability to score. "We created a lot, especially in the second half.

"We take the point, it's a long way (to go)." Liverpool boss Arne Slot bemoaned his side's lack of "individual special moments" as the English champions struggled to break down a resilient Leeds in a goal-less draw at Anfield.

The Reds were toothless in attack without the absent Mohamed Salah and Alexander Isak and were only saved from defeat late on by a tight offside call.

Despite scoring in the last six games, Dominic Calvert-Lewin started on the bench as Daniel Farke had one eye on the visit of Manchester United to Elland Road on Saturday.

Calvert-Lewin thought he had extended his scoring streak when he prodded in 10 minutes from time but had strayed just beyond the last defender.

A draw extends Leeds' unbeaten run to six games and takes them seven points clear of the relegation zone.

Fourth-placed Liverpool edge three points ahead of Chelsea, who parted ways with manager Enzo Maresca on Thursday, and Manchester United in the battle for a place in next season's Champions League.

'BORING' TOTTENHAM

Frank was given a hero's reception back at the club he returned to the top flight for the first time in 74 years and established as a Premier League force.

The Dane has not found it tougher to make an impact at Tottenham and they produced another display devoid of attacking inspiration.

The visiting Spurs fans chanted "boring, boring Tottenham" in the closing stages, while Frank was booed after the full-time whistle.

"Definitely, we don't create enough," admitted Frank. We need to continually work on that." A stalemate leaves both sides still separated by just one point with Brentford in ninth and Spurs 12th.

Crystal Palace boss Oliver Glasner said his depleted side are in "survival mode" after a 1-1 draw against Fulham extended their winless run to six games. Jean-Philippe Mateta's first goal in eight games opened the scoring for Palace, but Fulham captain Tom Cairney's fine strike rescued a point for the visitors.—AFP

Chelsea interim boss McFarlane braces for Man City clash after 'crazy 24 hours'

LONDON: Chelsea interim boss Calum McFarlane was officially introduced to the squad on Friday after a "crazy 24 hours" following Enzo Maresca's exit, with Manchester City looming.

Maresca left his position on Thursday with the club fifth in the Premier League table — 15 points behind leaders Arsenal — following just one win in seven top-flight games.

"It's been a crazy 24 hours, a whirlwind, as you can imagine but also really enjoyable, really exciting, so I can only feel positive about this," under-21s boss McFarlane told reporters on Friday.

McFarlane said there was a strong culture of support from the first team for younger players at Chelsea but that he was "officially introduced" to the first team on Friday.

"I met with a few of the individuals beforehand but I was officially introduced this morning," he told reporters.

McFarlane, whose daunting first task is to prepare Chelsea to face second-placed City at the Etihad, said that training on Friday had been "exceptional".

"They seem really focused, really driven and hungry," he added. "They know we've got a massive game on Sunday and we're going to have to be at our best, so you can feel that.

"They're professionals, they've done this a long time, they've been here before." McFarlane said that the Chelsea hierarchy had been supportive but that he did not know how long he would be in charge.

"The brief is to prepare the lads for Manchester City on Sunday and that's honestly all I know at the moment," he said.

Maresca's departure came after he reportedly held talks with City over succeeding manager Pep Guardiola.

During his 18 months in charge at Stamford Bridge, the Italian led Chelsea back into the Champions League and won the UEFA Conference League and Club World Cup.

Liam Rosenior, the head coach of French club Strasbourg, owned by Chelsea's parent company BlueCo, is the leading candidate to replace Maresca despite his lack of Premier League experience.—AFP

'Russians won't represent country at Winter Olympics even if war ends'

ROME: Russian athletes at the Milano Cortina Winter Olympics will not be able to represent their country even if a peace deal is reached with Ukraine, International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Kirsty Coventry said in an Italian newspaper interview.

"At this stage nothing would change the Committee's decision allowing Russian athletes to take part in the February games only as individuals representing themselves," Coventry told *Corriere della Sera* in an interview published on Friday.

The IOC banned Russia and Belarus following the former's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the IOC ruled in September that Russians and Belarusians competing at Milano Cortina would do so as individual athletes, without a national flag or anthem.

In other remarks, Coventry — the IOC's first woman president — said holding the Olympics in multiple cities, as Italy is doing, would become "the new normality" and the Milano Cortina games would provide useful guidance for the future.

The IOC did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for confirmation of Coventry's comments.

The Milano Cortina games run from Feb 6 to 22.—Reuters

Venus receives wildcard for Australian Open

MELBOURNE: Venus Williams will return to the Australian Open after receiving a wildcard entry, the tournament's organisers said on Friday, marking her first appearance at Melbourne Park in five years.

The seven-time Grand Slam winner last played at the tournament in 2021, exiting in the second round to Italy's Sara Errani.

Despite 21 previous campaigns, the American has never lifted the trophy, finishing runner-up twice — losing to sister Serena in the finals in 2003 and 2017.

"I am excited to be back in Australia and looking forward to competing during the summer," Venus, 45, said.

"I've had so many incredible memories there and I'm grateful for the opportunity to return to a place that has meant so much to my career."

Venus will become the oldest woman to feature in the Australian Open main draw, surpassing Japan's Kimiko Date, who was 44 when she bowed out in the first round in 2015.

She has also accepted a wildcard for the Hobart International, a warm-up starting on Jan 12, where she will join fellow major winners Barbora Krejcikova and Emma Raducanu.—Reuters

Al-Rajhi faces tough challenge in Dakar Rally defence

CENTURY Racing Factory Team's car is cleaned in the bivouac ahead of the Dakar Rally on Friday.—Reuters

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's first winner Yazheed Al-Rajhi will try to defend his Dakar Rally title when the two-week event starts in the desert kingdom on Saturday, with Toyota's 2025 runner-up Henk Lategan predicting the closest battle yet.

The annual endurance challenge, run over 13 stages and some 8,000km entirely in Saudi Arabia for the seventh year in a row, kicks off with a short prologue around Yanbu on the Red Sea coast before a 305km special stage on Sunday.

Drivers must negotiate terrain including towering sand dunes, canyons and vast desert expanses with stage six the longest stretch at 920km.

Toyota have won three of the last four Dakars in the top T1+ car category, last year with Al-Rajhi in the customer Overdrive team, but face a tough challenge from Ford and Dacia's array of champions in what is also the first round of the World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) season.

Qatari Nasser Al-Attiyah, a five-time Dakar winner with three different manufacturers, is with nine-times world rally champion Sebastien Loeb, Brazil's W2RC champion Lucas Moraes and Spaniard Cristina Gutierrez in the Dacia Sandriders team.

Loeb, whose world rally title record was equalled by fellow Frenchman Sebastien Ogier last season, is chasing his first Dakar win at the 10th attempt and this time has Al-Attiyah's former co-driver Edouard Boulanger alongside.

Spain's four-time winner Carlos Sainz, 63, and compatriot Nani Roma, a winner on two wheels and four, are driving Ford Raptors along with former German Touring Cars (DTM) champion Mattias Ekstroem.

French veteran Stephane Peterhansel, the 60-year-old winner of a record 14 Dakars on two wheels and four, returns with debutants Defender in the Stock production category.

"I think there's some very, very strong teams and everybody's starting to get their cars settled now. A lot of the teams are getting to the end of the development cycle of some of the cars," Lategan told the www.dakar.com website.

"The rules are written quite well, so I think this is probably the closest field of cars you'll ever see in the Dakar. Also, one of the biggest fields you'll ever see, so definitely there's massive competition.

"There's a lot of guys that can win and can fight for the podium. So, I'm expecting a really good battle."

The Dakar always claims some big names early on and Al-Rajhi may want to show patience at the start after breaking two vertebrae last April in an incident that kept him out of competition until September.

"Our target is to win again, that's most important. We'll see how it is but sure the speed is there," he said.

In the motorcycle category, Red Bull KTM rider Daniel Sanders will seek to become the first Australian to win back-to-back titles.

In a field of more than 100 bikes, Spaniard Tosha Schareina — last year's runner-up — could still be Sanders' biggest rival while two-time winner Ricky Brabec of the United States is also back on a Honda.

The Dakar began in 1978 as a race from Paris across the Sahara to the Senegalese capital but switched to South America in 2009 for security reasons. It moved to Saudi Arabia in 2020.—Reuters